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SHI'A TERRORISM THE CONFLICT IN LEBANON AND THE
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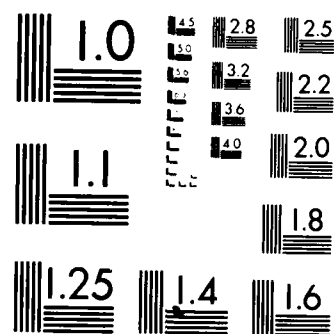
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Bruce Hoffman

July 1985

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SHI'A TERRORISM, THE CONFLICT IN LEBANON AND THE HIJACKING OF TWA FLIGHT 847*

Bruce Hoffman

Why is the United States the target of a terrorist campaign waged by Lebanese Shi'a extremists? The answer, to a great extent, lies in the traditional sectarian rivalries and present internal power struggle for control of Lebanon. By way of the hijacking of TWA flight 847, the United States has become the unwilling pawn in this contest.

At the center of this conflict is the Shi'a. The modern Lebanese state essentially is an artificial creation imposed by France in 1920 under a League of Nations Mandate. Since Lebanon was granted its independence in 1946 the country's three major religious groups--the Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims and Shi'a Muslims--have uneasily shared power. The National Pact (which in fact was no more than a verbal agreement) brokered by the country's two dominant elites, the Christians and Sunnis, reflected the demographic make-up of the new state. The Shi'a, however, were not included in the negotiations.

Because the Christians were the majority population, it was agreed that the president would always be a Maronite Christian and that parliamentary representation would be based on the proportion of six Christians for every five Muslims. The Sunnis, as the next largest community, would retain the prime minister's post; while the Shi'a, as the smallest, would receive the considerably less important position of president of the assembly.

Although this system was appropriate to the population divisions that existed in the 1940s, less than 30 years later it had become outmoded. The higher Shi'a birth rate had catapulted that once minority group to the majority. Yet, the Lebanese system of government was never altered to compensate for this change.

*A slightly different version of this article entitled, "Who's Who in Lebanon; a Short History of Why," appeared in the Sunday "Opinion" section of the *Los Angeles Times* on July 7, 1985.



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The poorer, less-educated and politically disorganized Shi'a were powerless to redress this imbalance. Residing largely in the under-developed southern half of Lebanon, for years they had been discriminated against by their Sunni co-religionists and the Christians. Consequently, they felt disenfranchised and alienated from the mainstream of Lebanese politics, commerce and society.

This began to change in 1968 after the return of a Shi'a cleric, Imam Musa al-Sadr, to his native country. The Imam had spent most of his adult life in the Iranian holy city of Qom, the spiritual base of the Ayatollah Khomeini. In 1974, al-Sadr organized the "Movement of the Underprivileged" to advance Shi'a interests and improve the community's lowly socio-economic conditions. This movement became what is today known as the Amal party. During the civil war that wracked Lebanon a year later, a militia was founded as the military arm of the party.

In 1978, al-Sadr mysteriously disappeared while on a visit to Libya. This prompted some of his more devoted followers to launch a campaign of aircraft hijackings that unsuccessfully sought to pressure the Qaddafi regime to release the Imam. Thus at the moment when Amal was thrown into disarray by al-Sadr's disappearance, it became susceptible to the fundamentalist call of the Khomeini revolution.

In 1980, Nabih Berri, a lawyer, was appointed head of Amal. But the void that had been created within the leaderless movement was too big for him to fill. An ex-school teacher, Hussein Mussawi, the alleged mastermind of the Libyan hijackings, was named as Berri's deputy and commander of the militia. But the radicalization of the Shi'a both in Iran and Lebanon had gone far beyond the narrow nationalist and social aims of Amal.

Mussawi, a fanatical supporter of Khomeini, sought to place Amal in the vanguard of a regional revolution based on the new Iranian Islamic Republic. Clinging to a moderate line, Berri advocated a new deal for the Shi'a within the confines of the present Lebanese state. In 1981, Mussawi broke with Berri and founded his own organization, Islamic Amal. Shortly after, another faction split from Amal and under the leadership of Abbas Mussawi (a relative of Hussein Mussawi) and the "spiritual guidance" of Imam Muhammed Hussein Fadlallah, formed Hezbollah, or the

"Party of God." Like Islamic Amal, Hezbollah embraced Khomeini's summons for a pan-Islamic revolt designed to turn Lebanon into an Iranian-style Islamic Republic. This allegiance to Iran put both splinter groups at loggerheads--and in direct competition--with Amal.

The hostage crisis in Beirut is most likely the outcome of both the competition among Lebanon's three main religious groups for control of the country and the internecine conflict within the Shi'a community itself. The TWA hijacking was undoubtedly a link in the chain of events that began last month when Amal, in its bid for predominance in Lebanon, attacked the Sunnis' Palestinian allies. The goal was to consolidate Amal's strength and deal a knockout blow to at least two of its opponents. Earlier fighting between the Christians and Sunni militias had underscored the military and political decay of the Christians' hold over Lebanon. Amal hoped to exploit this breakdown of Christian power by precipitating the entire collapse of the traditional political order in Lebanon. Berri, accordingly, maneuvered to ensure that it would be Amal who filled this vacuum.

This is perhaps a primary reason behind the hijacking of the TWA aircraft. If the Hezbollah terrorists believed to be responsible for the hijacking could obtain the release of the 700 or so Shi'a militiamen held prisoner in Israel, their group's stock would rise amongst Lebanon's Shi'a, and the ascendance of Nabih Berri and Amal would be checked.

In recent years Syria, Iran, Israel and the United States have been drawn into the struggle over Lebanon's ultimate fate. The Lebanese, as one observer has noted, "have always blamed others for their problems, and by the same token, depended on foreigners for solutions."** Bringing American pressure to bear on Israel through the hijacking is a new ploy to obtain a solution to Lebanon's problems on militant Shi'a terms.

**See Nikola B. Schahgaldian, *Lebanon: Prospects For Unification*, (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation), P-6929, November 1983.

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